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## THE MEANING OF BAPTISM AND ITS RELATION TO INFANTS.

BY THE REV. G. W. NEATBY, Vicar of St. John's,  
Highbury Vale.

*A paper read at Dean Wace House, E.C., on November 2, 1931, in connection with The Young Churchmen's Movement.*

IT is perhaps strange, at first sight, that the subject of Christian Baptism should often arouse sentiments remote from Christian charity. This can only, I think, be accounted for by the fact that both parties in the controversy feel that they are witnesses for vital truth. The Antipædobaptist feels that he is witnessing for the vital necessity of individual, personal faith; the Pædobaptist that he is called to maintain the social and corporate character of Christianity. If we cannot come to an agreement, can we not at least respect one another's convictions? Can the Antipædobaptist not refrain from a supercilious affectation of superiority, expressed in such epithets as "infant sprinkling"; and cannot the Pædobaptist, less guilty in this respect, so far as my experience goes, seek a deeper realization of the scripturalness of his own position? I propose to divide my remarks into three divisions, The Meaning of the Rite, The Subjects of the Rite, and the Language of the formularies of the Church of England.

### I. THE MEANING OF THE RITE.

Many of you will probably have noticed that in most disputes as to Baptism, the question most hotly argued is that of the proper subjects; and possibly of the mode of Baptism. I have, however, long been convinced that this is to invert the correct order. The first and most important question is the significance of the Rite. I have a vivid recollection of a visit paid me by a good "Open Brother," while I was conducting a Mission at Liverpool, during the Great War. He seemed very anxious to embroil me in a discussion on the subject of Baptism, with a view to showing me the falsity of my position. I suggested that we might profitably begin with the question, What is the *meaning* of Baptism? leaving to a later stage the question of the proper subjects of the Rite. To my simple question, What, in your view, is the meaning of the Rite of Baptism? he immediately replied, "It is a public confession of my faith in Christ." I asked him what Scripture he was prepared to adduce in support of his statement, and after some hesitation he replied that he could not at that moment think of one. Now I am bold to say, following, I think, Dr. Dale of Birmingham, that Scripture nowhere presents either Baptism or the Lord's Supper as "Confessions" of anything. I do not, of course, mean that there is no element of confession involved, but that the main purpose of the Rite, in either case, is not confession.

The first thing to notice, as Dr. Griffith Thomas has pointed out, is that Baptism is something done to me, not something that I do : and something done with a view to the *Future*. He says :<sup>1</sup>

1. In general, the idea is purification, or washing, a symbolical or ceremonial purification.

2. Then each of these has a specific purpose in the washing, it is "with a view to" something (*eis*). The Jewish Baptism was with a view to Temple membership and worship : the Baptism of St. John was with a view to repentance and the coming of the Messiah ; Christian Baptism was with a view to relationship with God in Christ.

3. A further characteristic is that of separation or designation for a specific purpose. Thus, the Jews used washing for the purpose of hallowing or consecrating their priests and Levites (Exod. xxix. 1, 4 ; Num. viii. 14), and so we read of "the water of separation" (Num. xix. 9). In the same way, the Israelites are said to have been baptized, that is separated, designated, separated for Moses (1 Cor. x. 2).

4. Thus, blending the word "Baptism," "Washing," and the preposition, *eis*, "with a view to," we arrive at the thought of "washing with a purpose." The general idea is purification, the specific idea is designation.

Bearing in mind this thought of Baptism being "with a view to," let us take, as an example, the first (historically) mention of Baptism in the New Testament. In St. Luke iii. we have an account of St. John the Baptist's dealing with those who came to him. Says one writer, a "Plymouth Brother" :<sup>2</sup>

"If we are to understand Baptism as set forth in Luke iii., we must carefully note John's attitude and also his words. He addresses those who came to him as a 'generation of vipers.' Yet he does not on this account refuse to baptize them, but he is very careful to tell them the responsibility that attaches to baptism and that nothing less than fruits meet for repentance will suffice. This produced certain questions from three different classes—the people, the publicans, and the soldiers. And both the questions and the answers bear upon practical conduct. John answered their questions and then proceeded to baptize them. Two statements seem to indicate that he baptized them all : He says, after having baptized them, 'I indeed baptize you with water,' and it is recorded 'when *all* the people were baptized.'

"From these plain facts do we not learn : (1) That the baptism signified a renunciation of their old life and a determination to live an amended one. (2) It was certainly not because they had been living an exemplary life, for John addresses them as a 'generation of vipers.' Nor are we told that they were sent away to live an amended life and then come and be baptized. The narrative implies that they were baptized there and then, and verse 21 supports this view, for they were all baptized *before Christ*. Consequently, there could not have been any interval worth speaking about, if any at all."

Once more, in the second chapter of the Acts, verse 38, we have the words of St. Peter to those who, pricked in their hearts, cried out, "Men, brethren, what shall we do?" "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, with a view to the remission of sins." And in Acts xxii. 16 are recorded the words of Ananias to the convicted Saul of Tarsus, "And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on His name" (R.V.). Now, whatever these words may or may not mean, they connect Baptism with something future. The

<sup>1</sup> *The Principles of Theology*, p. 372.

<sup>2</sup> *Household Baptism*, by Russell Elliott.

three passages together suffice to show that Baptism marks the close of one state of things and the entrance upon another. It may be well, perhaps, before leaving this part of my subject, to remind you that Baptism is clearly connected here and elsewhere in Scripture, with the *Remission of Sins*. St. Peter says, "Repent and be baptized . . . for (or with a view to) the remission of sins." If possible, the language of Acts xxii. 16 is stronger still. Indeed, so strong is it, that a short time ago, an Evangelical and "Fundamentalist" Churchman told me that he wished it had never been written. Such is the unfortunate tendency, even in "Fundamentalists," to try and make Scripture conform to our notions, rather than to mould our thoughts by Scripture. "Arise and be baptized, and wash away thy sins"; not, be it noted, as a confession that your sins have already been washed away! The main difficulty for us Evangelicals, in such passages, is that we have it fixed in our minds that individual dealing with God, and the spiritual cleansing which is between God and the soul, is the only thing of any moment. We brush aside, all too often, the fact that, in Scripture, there is always in view, a visible Church, or sphere of administration which, though never fully corresponding to the spiritual ideal, is never divorced from it. At the risk of shocking some of you, I would say that the High Churchman has been God's witness, often unconverted and carnal, it may be, but still a witness to Sacramental and Church truth, as certainly as that the Evangelical has been God's witness to Gospel truth.

The significance of the words, both of St. Peter and Ananias, is sufficiently clear. It is quite plain that Baptism, in both cases, was a shaking off of the old associations and the entrance into a new sphere altogether. Nothing more and nothing less than this, was the reason for the primitive habit of speaking of Baptism as "Regeneration." By it, outwardly and visibly, the candidate stepped out of the old conditions into new ones altogether. He was henceforth pledged to walk in newness of life.

Again, Baptism is connected with the Death of Christ and our union with Him in it. In Romans vi. the Apostle appeals to it, not to faith or conversion, as an absolute barrier to any continuance in sin.

"Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ, were baptized into (or unto, with a view to) His death? Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism unto death; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

Notice carefully what he does *not* say. Our Antipædobaptist friends sometimes say, "You have died with Christ by believing in Him; and now you must be buried with Him in baptism." But this, let it be stated emphatically, is *not* what St. Paul says! He says that we were buried with Him by baptism *unto death*, not because we were already dead with Him. Baptism, as one has truly said, is "a Gospel picture." It represents that moment when we

touch Christ, so to speak, in His life-giving Death. Cf. 2 Kings xiii. 21 : " And it came to pass, as they were burying a man, that, behold, they spied a band of men ; and they cast the man into the sepulchre of Elisha : and when the man was let down, and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood up on his feet." Once more, in Galatians iii. 27, we read : " As many of you as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ." It is clear, surely, that Baptism effects something ; and does not merely witness to something already effected. To " put on Christ " is something outward and visible. It is nothing less than the " Sacramentum " or oath of allegiance.

## II. THE SUBJECTS OF THE RITE.

We now come, in this necessarily meagre and hasty survey of our subject, to the question of those who should be the subjects of the rite. As to the obligation resting on adult converts, there is no controversy, so it need not detain us. The question before us is Infant Baptism. Our Antipædobaptist friends say, " Can you give us one unmistakable text explicitly asserting the duty of baptizing infants ? " To this I reply, quite cheerfully, " No, I cannot." But this by no means settles the subject. The argument from silence is notoriously a two-edged weapon. A thing may be passed over in silence because unknown, or because well known. The question I should be disposed to ask is, " Is the principle expressed in Infant Baptism a Scriptural principle ? " In other words, Are the children regarded in Scripture as being, for the purpose of religious rites, one with the head of the house ? Put the question in this way and the answer is not doubtful. Noah and his family, Abraham and his son, the Philippian jailer and his household, are all instances of what we may call the federal principle. But for the sake of clearness, I will adduce certain reasons, *seriatim*, for my faith as to the right of Christian households as such, to Baptism.

1. *The Historical Argument.* Some time ago, a pamphlet was lent to me by a friend in which the historical argument was stated with great cogency. The pamphlet is, unfortunately, out of print. The opening sentence was, as nearly as I can remember, this : " If Infant Baptism be, as our Baptist friends assert, an innovation upon the practice of the Apostles, how is it that no record exists of such an innovation, and still more, of the uproar which such innovation would have caused ? " Of course, if the practice were familiar to the Apostles, all is plain and easy. We know, from the writings of Tertullian, about a century from the Apostles, that Baptism was the prevailing custom. Justin Martyr speaks about A.D. 150, forty-eight years after the death of St. John, of persons sixty and seventy years old, who had been " made disciples to Christ in their infancy." The only form of " making disciples " is Baptism. I confess that it is to me impossible to imagine so great an innovation unrecorded in history.

2. *What the late Dr. Griffith Thomas calls "the exact relation of unconscious childhood to the Atonement of Christ."*<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Thomas says :

"Whether we think of children dying or living, the fact is the same ; what is the spiritual position of these infants to our Lord ? Surely the truth is that all children are included in the great atoning sacrifice, and belong to Jesus Christ until they deliberately refuse Him. This is the great spiritual fact at the root of the practice of Infant Baptism. It is our testimony to the belief that childhood belongs to Christ and has its share in the great redemption. We baptize a child not in order to make it Christ's, but because it already belongs to Him by the purchase of His Sacrifice on Calvary. It would surely be strange if our Lord had no place for unconscious childhood in His plan of mercy and love for the race, for in view of the fact that so many die in infancy, perhaps at least half the human race, it is surely impossible to think that they can be ignored entirely, and attention concentrated not on children but adults, with, it may be, experience of sin and wandering before receiving His love and grace."

In close connection with this thought is the attitude towards babies adopted by the Blessed Lord Himself. There were, apparently, those who thought that Divine blessing could only reach adult persons. Disciples were even then rebuking those who brought their babies to the Saviour.

The late Mr. Spurgeon once preached a sermon entitled, "Children brought to Christ, not to the font." But the implied antithesis is false. It would be as pertinent and equally question-begging, to say, "Grown men and women brought to Christ, not to the baptistry." The fact is that we bring our children to Christ in the very act of bringing them to the font, there to give them the outward sign and seal of blessing. If babies can receive blessing from Christ, they must surely be fit recipients of that blessing's outward seal and pledge. As the late Bishop Chadwick so well says :<sup>2</sup>

"Since children receive the kingdom, and are a pattern for us in doing so, it is clear that they do not possess the kingdom as a natural right, but as a gift. But since they do receive it, they must surely be capable of receiving also that sacrament which is the sign and seal of it. It is a startling position which denies admission into the visible Church to those of whom is the kingdom of God. It is a position taken up only because many, who would shrink from such avowal, half-unconsciously believe that God becomes gracious to us only when His grace is attracted by skilful movement on our part, by conscious and well-instructed efforts, by penitence, faith and orthodoxy. But whatever soul is capable of any taint of sin must be capable of compensating influences of the Spirit, by Whom Jeremiah was sanctified, and the Baptist was filled, even before their birth into this world (Jer. i. 5 ; Luke i. 15)."

3. *The Analogy of Circumcision.* That there is an analogy is certain, from Col. ii. 11, 12 (R.V.) :

"In whom ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ ; having been buried with Him in baptism."

<sup>1</sup> *The Principles of Theology*, p. 378.

<sup>2</sup> *Expositors Bible*, St. Mark, p. 273.

And again, in Rom. iv. circumcision is the seal of the righteousness of faith given to Abraham and to his infant son. Whether or not, the analogy of circumcision be enough from which to deduce Infant Baptism, it is at least sufficient for ever to discredit the argument that the unconsciousness of a child is a necessary bar to its receiving a sacramental rite. But as a matter of fact, circumcision involves the whole principle of what we may call the "federal" relations of children to the head of the house. And the "Baptist" position involves the supposition that Christianity stands in complete isolation from all that has gone before! It would be generally admitted that in the Old Testament the household bore a federal relation to its head, in matters of religious observance. Where, in the New Testament, can it be shown that this principle, pervading as it does all God's dealing with His saints of old, is abrogated in Christianity? It is not, I think, too much to say, that most of the objections levelled against Infant baptism, are equally valid against Infant circumcision.

4. *The Baptism of Households.* It is usually objected, by our "Baptist" friends, that we cannot prove that there were infants in the households mentioned in the New Testament. I am reminded of what an eminent Baptist Minister said to a friend of mine in connection with this point. He said: "I not only think it possible, but highly probable, that there were children; but it is not absolutely certain, so I do not baptize infants." Now, while I should, of course, agree as to the high degree of probability, I should not rest my case upon it. My contention is, that Household Baptism has a perfectly definite meaning, apart from any question whether there were children in the particular households mentioned in New Testament history. It is the assertion of the solidarity of the Christian household as such. It is the witness to the "federal," or corporate aspect of Christianity. And this "federal" principle is enunciated by St. Paul in 1 Cor. x. There, the children with the responsible head of the family were sheltered by the blood in the land of Egypt; and passed through the Red Sea into liberty. And this federal principle is seen also, in the fact that the children are addressed in the Epistles as forming part of the Church of God.

5. *The Great Baptismal Commission* (St. Matt. xxviii. 18). Literally, "Disciple the nations, baptizing them, etc." Speaking to Jewish disciples, had the Lord said, "Circumcising them," no question as to infants could have arisen. Commenting on this passage, Dr. Griffith Thomas says: <sup>1</sup>

"Baptism was therefore associated with discipleship, and as little children can become disciples of Christ and enter into true relationship with God, we can readily see that the Article is abundantly warranted in speaking of Infant Baptism as 'most agreeable with the institution of Christ.' We baptize both adults and infants with the purpose of their coming into possession of everything implied in the name of God. They are thus designated for the purpose of receiving and experiencing, not as already in possession."

<sup>1</sup> *Catholic Faith*, p. 167.

## III. THE LANGUAGE OF OUR FORMULARIES.

I must not omit the consideration of this question, as for many it constitutes the real difficulty. It is fairly common to hear it said, "I do not object to the baptism of infants, what I object to is certain expressions in the Office for Baptism in the Prayer Book." The expression to which most objection is taken, in modern times, for the Puritans and Calvin raised no objection to it, is, "Seeing, dearly beloved brethren, that this child is regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ's Church, etc." Before considering these words in detail, a word or two may be interesting concerning them. First, no expression used in the Prayer Book is stronger than those used in Holy Scripture; and it is surely allowable to place the same meaning on an expression found in the Prayer Book as we place upon the same expression when we find it in Holy Writ. Second, the words under consideration were used, not only by our own Reformers, but by Puritans and Continental Reformers of whose robust Protestantism there can be no doubt. In this connection I will quote from Dr. Dyson Hague's *Protestantism of the Prayer Book*, p. 79:

"They are found in services compiled by men flatly opposed to Popery, and if any interpretation can be given to them but the Roman, it must be given. They are words, moreover, which are found elsewhere in ultra-Protestant formularies, and employed by men of most Protestant prejudices. They are precisely similar, for instance, to those employed by one whom no one ever suspected of Popish proclivities, John Calvin, in his catechism:<sup>1</sup> and they may be employed by any who really believe in the power of God to receive as His own disciples the little infants."

Now what do these words really mean? Speaking roughly, there are three possible interpretations.

1. The literal, or what is known as the *opus operatum* theory. That is, that all the baptized are, by that outward act alone, and irrespective of all conditions, born again, in the fullest possible sense of that term. This is the doctrine of Rome; and is radically different from the doctrine of our Reformers. As this is so clearly shown in Dr. Mozley's *Baptismal Controversy* and in Dr. Goode's *Effects of Infant Baptism*, I may pass on to the second, viz.

2. The view usually known as "Charitable Hypothesis," defended ably by Dean Goode, both in his work already cited; and also in letters written at the time of the Gorham Judgment, to a public man whose name escapes me at the moment. Indeed, it is clear, as Dr. Goode points out, that only on such an hypothesis is a Prayer Book for Christians possible. The Book of Common Prayer assumes that those who use it are what they profess to be, i.e. Christians in deed and truth. As such, we bring our children to Baptism and ask for certain specific blessings. Having prayed in faith, we believe, according to the Lord's sure word, that we receive the things we ask; and proceed to give thanks for them. In other words, the thanksgiving for the regeneration of our children is the language of faith's reckoning.

<sup>1</sup> See Mozley on the *Baptismal Controversy*, part ii, chap. vii.

3. There is a third view, maintained by Mr. Dimock, by which the words are understood in a sacramental sense simply. Mr. Dimock maintains that this was the primitive and also the Reformation usage in connection with sacramental language. This means that, in receiving Baptism, we have received the sacramental sign and seal: and are thus "sacramentally regenerate." We may or may not have received the Thing signified. So in the case of a bank-note for five pounds. When I receive the note, I may quite correctly be said to have five pounds; and in another and equally real sense, I am not possessed of five pounds, until I have presented the note and received the gold.

Either of the two latter explanations of the words is, in my judgment, perfectly true and legitimate, being complementary, not mutually exclusive. The controversy is not now a burning one in the Church of England, as it once was. The controversy has shifted to the other sacrament. In that connection, we have a classic instance of the well-known use of sacramental language for the Thing signified. I refer to the words,

Hail! Sacred Feast, which JESUS makes,  
Rich Banquet of His Flesh and Blood.

These words, as is well known, were written by a Nonconformist and are used by those who are as far as possible (if not too far) from any "High Church" doctrine of the Sacraments.

There is one difficulty remaining; and I, for one, see no reasonable way out of it. I refer to the "promiscuous" baptism of all and sundry. This practice is condemned by the Church herself, we must remember. It is an abuse, arising largely from an accumulation of circumstances over which we, at least, have no control. It is a practice condemned by the *Church Times*, to its credit be it spoken; and those who seem least to mind it, are Evangelicals. Bishop Gore has some very valuable words on this subject. He says:

"The Church does not baptize infants indiscriminately. She requires sponsors for their religious education; and the sponsors represent the responsibility of the Church for the infants who are being baptized. It is not too much to say that to baptize infants without real provision for their being brought up to know what their religious profession means, tends to degrade a sacrament into a charm. On this point we need the most serious reflection."

Any who have tried to enforce discipline in this matter, will probably agree with me, that, short of a universal exercise of discipline, impossible in the divided state of the Church, we must be content to use the occasion, for a real instruction as to the solemn facts set forth in Baptism. The only alternative, is a universal refusal to baptize, thus cutting off the innocent with the guilty.